

THE HOUSES ARE NOT COMING

By FRED LASSEIRE

WHERE are the houses promised the Canadian people? Where are the homes to be built under the National Housing Act? Where are the Limited Dividend Corporations which were to build our low-rental housing and where are the slums which were to have been cleared for this housing? What has happened to the pleasant vision of dream-homes dear to the many veterans planning their return to Civvy Street? Where do these returned heroes and their families find parking space?

The answers are known to everyone. In one word, all of the promises, plans, talks and dreams have gone "phut".

What Is Being Done?

In Montreal, for example, 10,000 dwelling units are required for the next 10 years to keep pace with deterioration and to eradicate shortages and obsolescence. In 1945, less than 4,000 permits were issued; 2,241 dwellings built. Theoretically, of those built, 10% were to rent for less than \$40 per month. Actually no house can be built at present, following National Housing Act standards, to rent at an economic rent of under \$40 per month and the author has not come across any new dwelling rented below that figure outside of houses put up by Wartime Housing Limited, a Crown Company. In any case, when we realize that only some 20% of all family incomes can afford the payment of a rent of over \$40, we will see that what housing is being built is not only insufficient but does not touch those in greatest need of it.

The Toronto City Council is considering proposals for a \$4,000,000 housing development approved by the City's Housing Board. The development by the newly-formed Housing Enterprises of Canada, Ltd., will be under the N.H.A., depending on results of negotiations with the government. If this scheme is passed and approved by all authorities, it will see one of Toronto's slum areas cleared and rebuilt with 967 units but: "Though rented at moderate prices it will not constitute a low rental plan." Again the most needy will not have been attended to.

It is with a sense of horror that we see, on the one hand, an ever-increasing aggravation of the housing situation. Little more than 50% of the 57,000 houses required annually in Canada are being built. On top of that we have a backlog of 600,000 houses needed to bring the housing situation up to minimum standards. At the same time, on the other hand, old houses are adding to our slums and houses already condemned as unfit

for human habitation continue to be lived in. Houses in Ottawa, for example, condemned before the war—seven years ago—are still being lived in.

This is shameful! Still more shameful is the fact that so little is being done other than the pouring of crocodile tears and a lot of talking, a lot of promising and a lot of writing. Very little really helpful and constructive work is to be noted.

Ottawa is busy passing the buck from department to department. One moment Mr. Ilsley, Department of Finance, is on top, the next moment it is Mr. Howe, Department of Reconstruction. The Department of National Health and Welfare is fundamentally and humanly the most concerned, but the money and the power are not in its hands. It can only write good pamphlets on housing.

With blind faith in the power of private enterprise, the government exerted pressure on the lending institutions. They formed Housing Enterprises of Canada and they expect to do something. The government saw that not much could be expected from them so it set up its own Corporation, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation whose aim was to co-ordinate all housing activities. So far it is just one more body to accuse of inaction.

At the same time all builders are urged to build more and more. They don't need urging. They know they can sell all they will build. They also know that they can't touch the low-income groups. Mr. J. L. E. Price, M.E.I.C., Past-President of the Home Builder's Association, speaking to the Montreal Branch of the Engineering Institute of Canada on January 24th, 1946, said "It is an economic impossibility for private enterprise to now provide living accommodation within the means of the low-income group". Mr. Price further points out that a house costing \$3,500 to build in 1939 will now cost about \$5,250. "It does not appear to be any reasonable hope that building price will show any tendency to decline for a long time to come. On the contrary, the grave danger is that excessive demands for materials in the next few years, coupled with the scarcity of bricklayers, plasterers, etc., will result in costs going up instead of down."

Wartime Housing's Secret

As mentioned earlier, Wartime Housing Ltd., is building in Montreal 428 houses which will rent at \$22 to \$30 per month. They are being reserved for veterans only. Another 500 units may be undertaken shortly by this company following a petition forwarded to the Montreal City Council asking for further assistance to over 2,000 veterans who have applied for houses. Why is it that

Wartime Housing Ltd. can put up houses to rent so economically? In the answer to this question is the only true guide to the means of solving our housing crisis.

The government's own Reconstruction Advisory Committee's report on Housing in 1943 showed clearly that the government's housing policy was totally inadequate. It further indicated what steps must be taken to provide housing for the low-income groups. It showed how in all European countries, and even in the United States, it was necessary for the government to subsidize the housing for this group.

Wartime Housing can have rents at a low level because of municipal assistance (land and services) and of federal assistance (preparation of plans, overhead costs and the use of interest-free money with close marginal accounting). We have here the principle of subsidy established.

There is another element which contributes to Wartime Housing's success. This can be summed up by *large scale planning and standardization*. The houses are of a few standard types which permit the use of shop or site-fabricated panels. This means that machines in a factory or shop or in sheds on the site can manufacture panels or standard pieces without being influenced by adverse weather conditions. Obviously a greater efficiency can be obtained, with this large-scale planning resulting in the cost of the houses always shading by about \$1,000 or more the houses built speculatively or individually. It is significant that this has all been undertaken by a government company—it could only have been undertaken in this country by the government. One can remember how, at the time of its formation, all parties interested in house construction, from architects to builders, condemned the creation of this Crown Company and they obtained guarantees from the government that it would stop functioning the day hostilities ceased. At present those same interested bodies are doing all in their power to discredit the government housing achievement and yet they themselves show a complete bankruptcy in dealing with the problem. They have been forced to step aside, by popular demand, and see Wartime Housing Ltd. undertaking a vast post-war housing building program.

We don't want to give altogether the impression that this company is beyond criticism. The houses are lacking in imagination, are out-of-date in general design, in appearance and especially in layout on the site. Groups of these houses usually look unbearably dull and lack in social amenities. Rather than being planned as a community in accordance with the latest developments in housing layout and as recommended by the Reconstruction Committee, they are planned in the same individual, inhuman and uneconomical manner as our streets have been developed for years.

Further, there is waste in the system of competitive tendering among private firms for the contracts to build the houses. If the government had its own construction

gangs and its own plants, the cost of construction would be still further cut down. That is, if the government could ensure that materials evolved from the raw product to the finished building product set in place, in the shortest possible time, with the least number of intermediary processes, agencies and commissions, and that at no point along its evolution would profit have been made without change in the nature or character of the material, then the government could be certain of having reduced building costs to their rightful level. Of course this is still capable of modification by improved techniques and increased labour skills.

What is the program of action which would see the beginning of the war on housing needs?

Subsidization

First, we must have government subsidy of low-cost housing projects. The money was readily found, and in vast quantities, too, for the abstract ideals of defending our native land, our way of life, our heritage and proud possessions. Most of this money blew up in the air or under the sea. Surely the money can also be found now to create our heritage and possessions?

A subsidy will require protective measures such as a "means" test for those to whom the dwellings will be rented. Also it will require strict supervision of the construction industry to ascertain that it is not making huge profits at the expense of the ratepayers. Often a subsidized housing scheme has acted as a life-belt, bringing bankrupt contractors out of the deep.

Subsidized dwellings, it seems to me, should not be sold. The land should become the property of the community. The houses should be leased by the community on behalf of the government for long terms of, say 99 years (as recommended for London, England). Rather than having a decrease in city-owned property, it would increase, thereby ensuring facilities in carrying through town planning projects and in maintaining and increasing the amenities of the cities and towns. All phases of government would participate in these subsidies, and municipal taxes would be based on the rents rather than on the property.

This is all in accordance with the present tendency in housing—especially in the new Europe. In solving our urgent problem we should be as far-sighted and forward thinking as it is possible. We will thereby find the most lasting and satisfying remedy. We can no longer waste lives, health and money on petty compromises.

Modernization of Construction

Second, we should revise our whole system of building. What is known as the "building industry" is a chaos of organisms. Before this industry is an unparalleled boom but never was an industry so little deserving and so unready to rise to the occasion. For example, this is perhaps the only industry where the manufacturers buy most of their raw materials from a retailer.

Again we must call the government in as we can

expect little help towards a change from this industry. Its conservative constitution runs something like this: "The contractor is a referee among innumerable sub-contractors. The sub-contractors, in turn, are in willing bondage to the ancient customs and restrictive rules of craft labour union. The unions' obsolete and restrictive working customs are in turn frozen into local building codes and licensing laws." (*Life*, December 17, 1945).

Canada is fortunate in having a well worked out National Building Code. So far this code allows a certain freedom in construction as it is a permissive code. However, it is still based on "sound" old-fashioned building practice. The National Research Council on its own and in collaboration with the Departments of National Defence and of Reconstruction has been carrying on experiments and research into different types of building materials and of house construction. Its findings are not receiving the publicity they should. A new house building code should be prepared, based on these and on English and American findings. This code would have as its purpose the enabling of greater use of new materials and methods of construction and the establishment of standards in keeping with the needs of the housing situation and with the new techniques of building and planning.

Still more basic in its scope would be the extension of the work of the National Research Council to cover a thorough survey of the construction industry and of war plants to be reconverted. On the basis of its findings the Council would propose a nation-wide program for the manufacture of materials and building parts and for the actual erection of housing units. It would then be up to some Crown Company such as Wartime Housing Ltd. to put into practice these findings and to extend the scope of its work to cover subsidiary companies handling or supervising the manufacture of materials and the actual erection of the houses.

Planning

In short, the housing situation should be tackled with the same over-all planning that was used for the war. War-trained technicians, war industries, all existing facilities which could be harnessed to a full housing program should be made to fit into a co-ordinated plan of action. We have a need to be met and we must not allow preconceived ideas about house types or house planning or house construction to stand in the way of providing the dwellings required to fill the need.

The existing construction industry will continue to be the backbone of any housing program for some time to come. Prefabricated houses, improved trailers such as built by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States and factory-made dwellings will form other steady suppliers of dwellings. As things stand at present, it will still be necessary for the government to step in and handle the large amount of low-cost housing required.

Materials are short, labour is scarce, skilled labour is very scarce and what there is of both labour and material

finds its way into construction other than homes. The scarcity of materials and labour is directly affected by the brutally seasonal character of our methods of building and by the uncertainty of the extent of a construction program. The construction industry and its personnel is hardest hit by depressions and slack periods. A government program of construction will be of greatest importance in bringing stability to workers connected with construction or with materials for construction.

A special Department of Housing and Community Planning with its own cabinet minister or at least under a cabinet minister, preferably the Department of National Health and Welfare, should be set up without delay. Its function would be to undertake all of that is now expected from the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, plus all of the steps possible so that housing and community developments will follow the general lines set out in the Reconstruction Advisory Committee's 1943 Report. It would further have to consider the impasse into which the construction industry has led itself and the whole country.

We need to have a powerful central authority to guarantee the planning, research and construction necessary to good and efficient housing, to ensure that labour and materials will be used on housing projects first, that housing — with Federal and other assistance — be made economically available to those who need it most and that codes and standards of design and construction be brought up-to-date enabling the industrialization of the building "industry".

The U.S.A. has a plan for the building of 2,700,000 homes for veterans within the next two years. All materials and labour are harnessed behind this effort. One third of the houses will be prefabricated. They will cost under \$5,000. The government will cover risks in experimentation and in the conversion of war plants. 1,500,000 new building and material operatives will be trained. Wilson Wyatt, the housing administrator, is to be commended on his energetic program! We, in Canada, could have done as much. Now we are in a position to go still further.

In conclusion, let us remember to keep the scale of this enterprise in mind and to keep its importance before us. It involves the lives of some three million Canadians. The large number of dwellings required will make a marked imprint on our towns and cities. We cannot afford to be petty and small-scaled about such an undertaking. We must plan and plan. Our municipalities must have town plans. Housing must be undertaken as a vast all-embracing project with large-scale local developments with social amenities. Finally, the construction of this housing must be thought of in terms of efficiency and economy. It requires far reaching research and sound planning. It requires a new approach — a Twentieth Century approach to designing, to planning and to building. It requires the approach used in the manufacture of atomic bombs.

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C O N T E N T S

EDITORIAL	156
THE AUDITORIUM AND STAGE IN YOUR COMMUNITY CENTRE, John A. Russell	157
R.I.B.A. PRIZES AND STUDENTSHIPS	163
RICH'S-PROGRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION	164
GARAGE, TORONTO BRANCH, THE CANADIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY, Page and Steele, Architects	168
BROMO-SELTZER LIMITED, TORONTO, Earle C. Morgan, Architect	170
HOW MUCH HOUSING DOES GREATER TORONTO NEED? Humphrey Carver	171
THE HOUSES ARE NOT COMING, Fred Lasserre	175
THE INSTITUTE NOTES, CORRESPONDENCE, ETC.	178

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